

RIPENING STORIES

An abstract of a Creative Project by
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This is a collection of short and longer stories entitled Ripening Stories dealing with rural and small town settings in Michigan, and a year which I spent in Europe. The Michigan stories concern my experience working after I left college, and the European stories deal with what happened in Denmark and Greece. In each case, the stories involve a protagonist who is in, but not of, his surroundings, and focus on the conflict between him and what is happening to him. The stories are: "Crude Breakfast: A Penance," "Pickin' Apples," "The Free State," and "No Country for Old Men."

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"Ripeness is all; the rest is silence."

--Shakespeare

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by

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CRUDE BREAKFAST: A PENANCE

I watched Max Phlox start in on his eggs across the table. He stuck a corner of the toast down into the yolk, then pressed more of it into the running yellow with his fork. When he lifted it toward his mouth a globule of snotty stuff tried to keep the toast down. But he bit off half of the triangle with a deft snap. I drank some coffee to alleviate the pangs of hunger twisting in my stomach, but they only worsened.

"How long 'jeh wait fer them eggs?" I asked him.

"Tun munots" he said, wiping yolk from his chin.

"That is, ten minutes if Jasper's got eez hand on nat spatula steada on Dina's rump!"

Just then the waitress was next to me, glaring over at Max with a plate of breakfast in her hand. She had been in my class in high school, and, with her protuberant body and double-jointed way of walking, had caused conflagrations of puberty sickness in all of the young buck males. Her early back seat education had resulted in a reputation that she didn't try to live down so much as just keep quiet. The icy stare was for Max, but her voice came out as smooth as clean sheets.

"You wanted 'em up?" she cooed.

"Always up," I smiled at her.

She scraped a soft breast across my shoulder as she put the plate on the table, saying "Hope it's hot enough for you."

As I ate, the bakery began to fill up and get noisy. People helped themselves to coffee and waited to order food. The women; secretaries, shop clerks, and bank tellers, sat at the round tables near the walls of the room in predictable groups. The men all sat at the long table in the center, some talking, others looking at the newspaper. Men from all the businesses in town gathered here each day to talk sports, politics, and women. I figured most of them for crude simpletons since I'd come home from college. The needling around the table lacked a grim, realistic view of the shit in the world, but the humor sometimes tickled me anyway.

The Chief of Police put a cup of coffee, a donut, and a walkie-talkie on the table next to me and sat down. His hair smelled of lilac. It disturbed the fresh rolls smell of the bakery. "Ain't shaved that beard off yet, eh, Curley?" he asked.

"Keeps the egg off my shirt" I said without looking up. "Up pretty early today, ain't ya?"

"Somebody's gotta keep the town safe for raisin' kids" he replied. The grocer, a fat-cheeked man with pinched eyes said from across the table "That why you never got married, Jack? Scared you'd have to nail yer own

youngun?" The lawyer next to him, dressed in cream yellow pants and an oatmeal-colored jacket, breathed a curse into the newspaper. He reached for his coffee, then said, "Pass the sugar!" Everyone at the table heard him, but no one moved. He lowered the paper, eyed the sugar at the other end, and repeated "Pass the sugar!!" The old fellow near the sugar looked at the banker opposite him and grumbled "Noticed how these young fellows don't have no manners tord their elders no more, Burt?"

"Right enough," the banker replied, "and some of 'em don't know how to dress yet, do they Wheeler?"

Before I could answer the policeman said "Better git that grape jam off your lapel before you talk too loud, Burt. Curley might offer you his sweat-shirt."

"PLEASE!! Pass the sugar!" the lawyer shouted.

"Nice mornin', eh Eldon?" the old fellow said as he passed the sugar.

"Dandy!" Eldon snapped. And then an afterthought: "Wise asses!"

The clink of cups and spoons amid the steady sound of conversation, broken by occasional laughter, blended in the room as customers passed in and out. I nursed my third cup of coffee and felt the slippery eggs working through me. The clock read ten-to-eight, and the back page of the paper said that an emminent research doctor had discovered that marijuana caused male mice to develop breasts. As Dina

leaned over with the lawyer's pancakes I observed what pot hadn't needed to do. She caught me in mid-stare, smiled, and pressed a hip against the table as she filled my cup again. "That's good, Dina," I said, hating the waver in my voice. "I'm as charged up as a young stallion."

"Oh, what are you gonna do with all that energy?" she teased.

I scalded my mouth with a quick gulp, just as my father walked in. He was dressed in a light green summer suit, wore a plaid hat to hide the baldness, and greeted the men at the table with an expressive smile and still-sleepy eyes.

"How ya doin t'day, Q-ball?" the policeman asked him.

"Too early to tell," he said, exaggerating a scowl. He faked a jump when Dina approached with his coffee, and some sloshed on her hand.

"OOoouu!!"

"Kinda nervous t'day, ain't ya?" he asked.

"Oh, you always make me nervous" she said. He squealed out a lecherous laugh and ordered two eggs up. "Always up?" she grinned, turning away.

"Aren't you workin yet?" he asked me.

"Just leavin" I replied.

"Don't blame ya" said the policeman, "so am I."

"Didn't mean to scare you away" my father said.

"Well, you know how it is with the working class,"

Jack said. "No, then again, you probly don't. I gotta go check the parkin' meters. I've got an accident report for you, but I'll wait another hour until your outta here."

"What's old Walter Rue buildin' out behind his house?" my father asked the banker. "They just had their twenty-fifth anniversary, and all their kids have moved away, haven't they?"

The banker looked over both shoulders and leaned forward secretively, though no one was near him to eavesdrop. "He's gittin' separated from his wife!" he whispered.

"So what's that got to do with what he's buildin'?"

"That's an addition on the house, where she's gonna live," Burt continued. "She told him she couldn't live with him another day, and so he'd better git busy buildin' her a place to live."

"Separated, huh?" I exclaimed, and my father made the disbelieving sound in his throat that he'd learned from so many years of listening to Paul Harvey on the radio.

"Looks like General's outta the hospital," someone said, and I turned to see Felix Custer come through the door. He teetered on arthritic legs, peering through glasses so thick his eyes seemed to smear. It hurt to watch him. He placed one foot before the other with unsteady deliberation, about to topple over at any minute. In one gnarled hand he gripped his usual two cookies. In the other he carried a paper sack that looked like it contained books. At the

sight of the brown bag the lawyer gave an almost imperceptible start, folded the newspaper, and rose to leave.

Everyone at the table exchanged greetings with the old man, who had dropped into a chair like a dead crow. As the lawyer headed out Felix spoke up, "That you, Eldon? Say, I got some books for ya."

"Drop em off at the office," Eldon clipped without stopping.

"Goddamnsummafabitch but ain't he in a awful hurry," Felix exclaimed, looking up at Dina through egg-like eyes.

2.

"Where we headed?" I asked. George revved the engine of the old red truck with "Amrozowitz Plumbing and Heating" painted on the door, then pulled out of the driveway. Without answering he pushed in the cigarette lighter and put a thin joint in his mouth. "Git up on the wrong side of the stable this mornin, George?" He lit the joint, filled his lungs, and handed it to me.

"We gotta set a sink and stool out there t' Miss Sanchez' cottage, n' after that clean up. We'll take our time, though. Later we start on the hospital job. Honcho's are playin' golf all afternoon."

"We, hell!" I said. "If she's loungin' around in that hot pink nightie again, the only tool you'll use is the one in yer pants!"

He exhaled the word "Sheeeeeeit!" in a cloud of smoke. "Yer just sore cause I made ya work down in the crawlspace yesterday, ain't ya?" he challenged.

An old man in a blue Buick backed out in front of us along Main Street, and George slammed on the breaks, dropping the joint. I leaned to pick it up, saying, "Only 'cause you wuz workin' in her crawlspace meanwhile. Hell, the floor under there was movin' like a marchin' band!" He turned and gave me a big grin, eyes glazing.

"Oh, that's right, she wanted me to thank you for turnin' on that drill," he said, "She got a big charge oughtta that."

I snuffed the joint as we passed the Post Office. Old Felix Custer stood by the mailbox talking to a bean pole of a man in too-short jeans. The man was taking a book from his back pocket. "There's Stretch Funnels," George said. "He's a good half a bubble off plumb, that boy."

"Wonder what he's readin'," I chuckled. "Bet it's juicy."

"Same stuff you read, probably."

"Shit, George, an illiterate like you couldn't tell the difference anyway."

"Who you callin' illiterate!" he barked.

"Oh, just take it easy. You read as much as anybody else around here. Except for maybe my father. But Christ, all those animals in the bakery talk about is football and

pussy. I spend a couple years in college, read a few books, think about some different things, and when I come back here I get the feeling the world's a tuxedo and I'm a pair of brown shoes. Just pisses me off sometimes, that's all."

"You just think about all that highfalutin' stuff too much," George observed. "What you need is to get out and drink a few stews at night and find yourself a little 'strange'." He nodded, as though realizing more and more the wisdom of what he'd said. "You just come with me up to the Whiskey Creek Ballroom on Saturday, and I'll have Doris fix you up with one of her tight-lipped girl friends. Them real quiet ones 'd like ta drain ya dry, I hear tell."

"Yea, O.K. George, we'll see." I sat back, hoping he didn't have any more to say, and let the pot take over. My thoughts drifted easily, to Dina in her tee-shirt, to plump Miss Sanchez and the look on George's face when she came down the stairs to let us in, to the Henry Miller book I'd been reading, and the line about him being a hyena going forth to fatten himself on life. I began thinking about the clarinet player in the band back at school, and longed to get the dull, celibate summer over with. "Can't get back there soon enough," I said aloud.

"What?" George said.

"I said I'm ready to clear oughtta here already. I'm tired of scraping shit off my hands at night. How do you stand livin' around here, anyway?"

"Like I said, Doris's got some friends, and if you've got any nuts at all, big words or not, you'll dip the ole wick into one of 'em."

"Lay off, George. Here's Miss hot pink's driveway."

3.

I tightened the rubber clamp on the sewer pipe, checked it for slope, and crawled out of the trench. George resumed digging with the back-hoe. There was no wind, the sun baked the hospital lawn, and I wiped sweat from my forehead and neck with my tee-shirt for the thousandth time. The tractor shook up and down as boom and bucket swung left toward the pile of sand, jostling George around. His fingers manipulated the hydraulic levers as though detached from his body, and I could see from his eyes that he was long gone in a daydream. I had set the sink and toilet alone that morning while he had "Instructed Miss Sanchez in the ins and outs of her plumbing." I envied him the excitement in the midst of a work day, but not the woman. The size of her arms would allow her to press six tortillas at once, and they'd be ready-greased for the skillet. Her legs I didn't want to think about. When I had pointed out these flaws to George on the way back to town he only replied, "Eight to eighty, blind, crippled, or insane."

The hospital janitor, Teddy Kamalinas, stood next to me watching the work. He was from some Greek island, and

rumor had it that he'd lost his wife to an Italian who owned a pin-ball machine outfit in Chicago. "You come soon to septic tank. What you do then?"

"We're gonna fire up that compressor and blast through this sucker with an air hammer," I replied. "Hafta cut a swath right along the top."

"I go back to work," he said. "Smell terrible here."

He was right. George had come to the edge of the big septic tank, and knocked in a cement block from under the edge of the slab on top. He got down from the tractor with his face twisted into a grimace. "Every germ in the state down there," he whined. "Let's go git some coffee."

4.

The men's table in the bakery was full, so we took our cups to a corner table and joined my father. His hat was pushed back on his head, and he looked sad.

"Felix Custer just died," he said.

"Ambulance wheeled into the hospital 'bout two-thirty," I said, "musta been him."

"Cleanin' lady found him. Jack said he was settin' in a chair with a dirty book on his lap. Books all over the room, and a half empty bottle of gin on the table. Biggest messa porno books he's ever seen, Jack said. Stretch Funnels said he'd burn 'em next week."

"Burn 'em, hell!" I interrupted, "He'll keep 'em in

circulation around town."

"How's that?"

"Nothin'," I shook my head.

"Well, I gotta git." My father left fifty cents on the table and walked out.

"Too bad," George said. "I remember when he was up to the huntin' cabin with us. Hadn't noticed that new cabin between ours and Max's. With a skinful a'gin one night he stepped out the back door to relieve himself. When he heard some noise next door he says, 'Evenin' Max.' He was standin' in the light from the doorway lettin' her flow. Woman's voice from ten foot away, where she was gettin' wood, says 'I ain't Max, and put that thing away!' Ole General jumped back inside pissin' all over the floor, himself, and into his drink he'd set down on his way out. Funniest thing I ever seen. He sure was a comical old fart."

"Yea, but he's been at the water's edge for awhile, though," I said.

"What was that you said about those books, anyway?" George asked.

"I think there might be a little club passin' 'em around town," I said, lowering my voice. "Could be some 'o the town hot shots in on it, too. He was handin' books around to several, far as I know. Might be fun to make some of 'em squirm, knowin' the secret. Up for a little moral blackmail, George?"

"That's somethin' I'd just as soon not know," he replied. He looked at me as though I had just stepped on one of his marijuana plants, and rose to get more coffee.

As I handed my empty cup to him, Dina walked over to me. She tucked her tee-shirt down into her apron so that it was tight on her, and sat down.

"You smell like donuts," I said, smiling. She leaned closer as George returned.

"My mother's gone shopping, and my car's gettin' fixed," she said. "Could you maybe give me a lift home at five o'clock? It's just a little ways out in the country."

I tried to meet her large-eyed stare, which was warm enough to make my sun-burned shoulders hurt. George was looking into his coffee, pretending not to listen, but smiling. "Oh, I reckon I can handle that," I told her.

"Sure ya kin," she breathed, touching my arm. "I'll wait in yer car. Yer a darlin'."

"O.K., see you in a while, Dina."

George showed me a teasing grin. "You better git yourself a good set of reins, Curley. That'n'll buck, I'm figurin'."

"Not for long, Podner, and you can swallow yer advice."

5.

Back at the hospital, I was having trouble paying attention to the work. Everything smelled like donuts, and

the eyes of Dina Crouch had started a flurry of pornographic daydreams. I couldn't stop my imagination from rehearsing lines and moves.

George was in front of me, chipping away at the eight inch slab of cement. The noise of the air hammer and smell of the cesspool weren't enough to break my thoughts.

"Got her started," he said. "Here, you take a turn."

I tested the air hammer, then placed my feet just behind the hole. The hammer pounded through and broke off a large chunk. When it went on through the cement, the weight of it pulled me toward the hole and I started to fall. George jerked on my belt from behind, and I regained balance, but the air hammer slipped and dropped down the hole. As the chunk of cement splashed in the darkness below the hammer stopped falling. I turned to see George with the compressor hose wrapped around his waist.

"DUMB ASS!" he hollered, "you'd fall in a barrel 'a tits 'n come out suckin' yor thumb!"

"Sorry," I said. I leaned over the hole, looked down, and spat, desperate for five o'clock to come. "What the hell's that floatin' down there?" I asked. George peered into the septic tank, then burst out laughing. I looked at him, exasperated. "Well, what is it?"

"Can't you figure it out?" he laughed. "Why, hell, that's jist yer reflection down there."

6.

When I walked into the house, my mother looked away from the TV. "You're late fer supper, where ya bin?"

"I bin out, and I ate plenty. But if you got anything left, I could still eat more." She rose and walked into the kitchen. I wondered if she could smell Dina Crouch on me, then figured it was just me. I still felt a little bit damp, and in my stomach humming birds were putting my lets to sleep. She had treated me to a quick course in hay crushing in her father's barn, and though my back itched, I put off scratching it to prolong the image of her up there. At first it bothered me some that she smoked cigarettes while she did it, but she was so good at it that I soon could overlook her reserve. I started to wonder if she'd need a ride anywhere tomorrow.

"Here, eat some salmon," my mother called from the kitchen.

"Smells just like a virgin," I said.

"How would you know that," she demanded. "You're a big talker alright, just like your father."

"Never mind. Where is he, anyway?"

"He brought home a big box of books he said came from Felix Custer's library. He's in the study readin' 'em now. Looks like a bunch of trash to me."

When I'd finished eating, I hurried back to my father. He sat in his big chair, a pile of books beside him, reading

one that was titled Laid, Splayed, and Paid. "So you collect that shit, too, eh?" I demanded. He looked up without saying anything. "What's so edifying about these things, anyway?" I picked up a copy of a book with a blank cover. Inside was the title Love-Muscle Beach. I sat down and started reading. When my father got up to leave, I saw that it was after eleven o'clock. "See you at the bakery for breakfast," I said, and he nodded.

PICKIN' APPLES

The first day is always the hardest. Strapping the bucket over the shoulders, picking fast but laying the apples in gently, hands always moving, mind floating with the clouds. The ladder is heaviest that day, the bottom rung rapping against shins the most painful, and the repetition most tedious: fill bucket, walk to crate, empty, back to tree, up ladder, down with full bucket, repeat.

And the need for consolation, that day, is acute. Hank's voice, calling "Break" most welcome. Hank was my college sidekick and is now a working and travelling companion. It is his father's farm we are picking. Hank is big, solid, good natured, and capable of incredible amounts of physical labor. In fact, he's damn tireless. "Just keep thinkin' Spain, Spain," he tells me, rubbing his shins. "Every two crates, a dollar; every two dollars, a day in that hot goddamn sun with 'cerveza muy frio' and brown dimpled Senoritas rubbin' the oil on."

"Yea, let's rob a bank and go, tomorrow," I mumble, "'cause my palms feign this practice, and dream, instead, of small smooth knees."

"Quit talkin' like that," he scolds, "we've just started. You know the first day's always the longest."

It got easier. Best was the morning walk out to the

orchard with a stomach full of eggs and taters, the frost tap-tapping on fallen leaves as the sun came up, to join Lester by his fire. He would be rubbing his old black hands over the flames, hands that squeezed fruit for most of his 63 years. He was small in frame, and lean as a cat 'n the water. His knees were always bent, as was his back, yet he shuffled and shifted around constantly as he stood. He never sat down. His round face, a white pencil-thin mustache on his lip, was brightened with eyes that shone with both wisdom and childish delight. Lester's quick smile infected anyone around.

"Hey Hank, hey Karl . . . nice moanin'."

"Yea, Lester, keepin' warm?"

"Tryin' to. Prayed fo' good pickin' t'day, big ahples, low limbs." (The word coming out AH-ples, like a preacher saying 'God', a round sound.) "A nip fo' the cold?" He hands a pint of Seagram's VO across the fire.

"Good medecine," I say, after a hot gulp. Lester's eyes twinkle from under the sweatshirt hood, his lips pulled back in a grin showing the one remaining tooth, right in the middle. Hank drinks again. Lester's comin' on with a story.

"Nut'n like we usta git down 'n Geoga," he says, "from ole Elmo's still. Way back in the woods it wuz, two-three mile from any road. Yu'd take yo jug, anytime, day o'night, it wuz awways goin'."

"With nobody around?" Hank asks, returning the pint. Lester tips it up, then sighs wide-mouthed, shudders once, and resumes.

"You neva saw nobody nowhere . . . jist fill yo jug outa the tap n' put fitty cens n' the tin cup an walk away."

"You mean everybody payed?"

"You didn pay, you got the thuty-ought-six bullet n' the back. Man in a tree somewhere, you neva seed'm. Ev'body payed."

And he'd laugh, and we'd laugh, exchange a look, and kick sticks into the fire. The pint tucked away, Lester would fit his gloves on, saying "Les' pick dem AHples!"

Two weeks into the harvest, back strong, hands roughed-up, thumbs split and bleeding from a thousand apple stems, I sat with Hank and friend George in the Vassar Liquor Bar, sipping Stroh's beer. George was gulping 'em down, telling about the fight he'd heard the previous night. His mother and step-father were edgy, like everyone else, with the approach of winter.

"It's her third husband," he say saying. "My dad died of a stroke when I was five. Mom re-married, and he drowned before a year was up."

"Jesus Christ," said Hank, "rough road."

"Yea, then she married Al. He's alright, but doesn't like the rest o' the family . . . can't keep 'em straight. Hell, I've got at least thirty close relatives, all told.

Three sisters named Judy. If you don't think Thanksgiving's confusing," he chuckled. At Hank's bidding, we all drank heartily to our bachelorhood.

As I was getting another round of beers, Val walked in. She was a short, slim blond with lots of teeth in her smile and hazel eyes, hardly open. Talkative, sometimes loud, she still had some cheerleader left in her from high school. I didn't mind.

"Fraulein," I greeted, "wanta drink some Tequila with me tomorrow night? Hank's going to a poker game."

She cocked her head, smiling with the eyes and teeth. "O.K." A little blush behind the freckles, a round-cheeked pinkness like the skin of a Golden Delicious, fetching on the bough. "I get out of work at 10:30," she said. "C'mon over." So healthy, corn-fed, I thought. Pulling with forced nonchalance on my beer, I invited her to join us.

Karl,

C'mon in. I'll be home shortly. Put on a record if you want. There's beer in the fridge. If there's anything else you want, go ahead and take it. Be here soon.

Val

I had to smile. There was plenty more I wanted. Inside, I found mostly John Denver records and put one on. The flavor of the apartment fit the town, Frankenmuth, and the girl. Happy German folks, I thought, plenty of beer drinkers, many who spoke only broken English. With names like Schultz, Schwartz, Zender, Eckenswiller. Here was the famous Bavarian Inn, where Val waited tables, dressed as a

cute little fraulein. I noticed a loaf of local Sauerkraut Rye bread lying on the table. I found a can of Busch and opened it. There was a curious magic here, something that pulled at the corners of my mouth. I figured I had better be careful with this one.

Hank and I got so we spent more time around Lester's fire each morning. His stories tickled us, even the third and fourth time around. Wise with years, yet fidgety as a boy, what he believed was just the reasoning out of what his eyes took in.

"Look aroun," he said one morning. "See all lis stuff growin, growin up all the time. Grass growin up, ahple trees reachin up, evathing going up all aroun. Know why dat is?" eyes peering at Hank, then me.

"What makes that?" I ask.

"Gravity," Lester replies, with complete assurance. Hank laughs, and I echo it. Lester looks hard at both of us, hands on his knees, back parallel to the ground. "Hell yes," he says, "Ev'n dem rocks grow."

More amazed laughter. "Rocks grow!?"

"Hell yes. Ya see, come winner time, the groun gits big wid frost, pushin' dem rocks up. Seen it many a time. N'den come Sprang, dat frost melts n' the ground go back down, leavin the rock pushed up. Well, dat space lef unna there gotta fill up wid somp'm, don' it? Sho nuff, dat rock growed where you can't see it. Been growin b'fo enya us wuz bone."

It makes so much sense we can't argue. Hank tries to change the subject. "Gettin good pickin lately, Lester?"

"No, no bayud pickin."

"Haven't you been prayin for good trees?"

"Yea, but dat don' always work," he says, head waggin.

"Sometimes 'z jist blind luck." Hank and I trade smiles. Lester always seems to have a plan B. "Sometime the devil aroun, gotta be. Frinstans you see a fly comin strate fo yo eye, an you move quick to one side . . . dat damn fly turns too, n' gits you right n' d eye enna way. O'else you kick a stone, dat stone hit a limm an come right back in yo eye. It's jist too damn PERFick, dem times, jist too PERFick! Gotta be the devil."

We agree, as Lester looks curiously at our smiles. "Thing you gotta do'z git yo lick workin. You got yo lick, dem crates fill up quick, ahples come right inta yo hand like ain't nuttin holdin em up. Man kin pick mo in two ahrs wid his lick goin den he kin all day widdout. If I don' git it damn quick, may'z well gwone home fer a nip."

"Let me know if you do," I tell him.

By the time the third week of pickin arrived, I noticed that my mind was quick to stray into day-dreams. The hands picked automatically while the imagination flew with the honking V's of Canadian geese in autumn's grey sky. Hunters plugged away at squirrels in nearby woods, corn was giving in stiffly to the harvesters as pheasants scattered,

and my conquest of Val invaded the mind's drifting through natural signs all around me. Riding to Frankenmuth one night, late, to scout her up, I saw a train pass under the old wooden bridge. Aloud I thanked the spirit of Sigmund Freud. I stalked on more confidently toward her lair. Her country care was becoming a need.

"You're going to Spain when the apples are done?" she asked one night, her bare arm resting on my chest.

"Yep, around Thanksgiving."

"God, I wish I was goin. I gotta stay here and wait on these damn old people. They go 'Schprecken-zee-Doytsch,' like they're from Tennessee or somethin and I gotta talk some German and tell them I'm savin up to go back to college so my tips'll be bigger. Pretty exciting, huh?"

"Not bad. Don't you ever get tired of smilin?"

"No, man, just tired a workin is all."

"Best thing for a tired waitress is a gentle-handed apple picker," I say, giving her a little squeeze.

"Aw, you and your little sayings. Tell me more."

"O.K., how's this . . . best advice my father ever gave me: 'Watch out for women who take too seriously what is poked in fun!' She pulls my beard with a laugh and a squirm.

"Man, you know you got it made. Head full o'pot, belly full o'beer, and a naked lady layin beside you. You're a fat cat, boy."

A contented laugh breaks out of me. "Ain't nothin I can add to that."

So occasionally I wasn't sleeping at the farm. Out by the fire, Lester would gaze at me with a teasing smile, devilry in his eyes, and say, "Hank, what's dis boy Karl bin gittin? Lookee dat big smile 'n his beard."

"He's gettin what he wants," Hank reports. "Ain't pickin worth a DAMN anymore."

"Somebody around here's gotta be takin care of," I say, "it ain't just a bilge pump down there, you know."

"Mine's bin jist dat a long time now," Lester laughs. "I bin married three times, tho'. Had thut-teen; no jist a minute, fit-teen?; well, sump'm like dat numba a young. Don' live wid no wife no mo."

"Why not?"

"Well, y'see, soonr o' later dey git 'n yo blood. Den, when dey do sump'm bayud t' one a yo kids, o t' you, like lie, then you cud jist kill 'em. You git so mad you wanna kill 'em. Dat's when iz time to go, when dey git'n yo blood."

"But don't they follow you around in your head?" asks Hank.

"Well, no, no," says Lester, fingers pressed to his brow in deep thought, "iz like dis here. One time I's pickin in New Yoke, 'n there wuz dis robin dat sang by the tree I's pickin. Dis wuz back when people yusta whistle, so I

whissled back 'n foth with 'em. One day dis robin made a soun in his thote, like 'ngngngng' dat I couldn't make, so then on he made dat soun ta cut off my whisslin an earitate me. When dem ahples wuz picked, I went ta Flawda ta pick awringses. One day dis flock a robins comes inta the awchud, an dis one robin come right ova ta my tree. By God, I thawt I reconized 'em, cuz he whissled dat same way, 'n made dat soun 'n his thote I cudn't make. He stayed aroun earitatin me fo three days!"

"You think he followed you there?" Hank asked.

"No, no, we jist kinda run inta each other."

Hank and I roared, while Lester even allowed a smile. Then he looked at me. "So you watchit, Karl, cuz you neva know what you gonna run inta anytime." He poked my ribs. "Look like you got YO lick goin, tho!"

The last day of tree-picking, with one week left of picking up windfalls for cider, three drugged and drunken friends showed themselves at the farm. Hank was there, and drove them to Val's, where I was unwinding from the long harvest of fruit. It was 2:30 a.m. They scolded me about such indulgences, pointed out the power in 'the red spider,' (an image from a poem by James Wright), and furthermore lured me into their night-long debauchery with some warm Muscatel. Scratching the poison ivy that was spreading between my fingers, I bid Val a quick and torrid farewell, wondering if I'd ever get anymore of those German hugs. I

soon found out.

Karl,

I don't want to see you anymore. You're going away to Spain and I'm too scared of getting attached to you. That's just the way I am, I can't help it. And you don't want to get attached to anything, do you? Thanks one hell of a lot for giving me poison ivy, too, chump.

Val

So she was gone, that fast, right through my fingers. The note was inevitable, though, and not so courageous, since I was leaving in a week anyway. And anyway I had the last laugh. When she scratches around down there, she thinks of me.

Lester was leaving the next day, so he came up to see us with a bottle. He appeared to have a head start on it. Pouring us two-finger shots in styrofoam cups, and four fingers worth in his glass, he smiled and looked us over.

"Say sump'm b'fo we eat?"

"Go ahead, Lester, say somethin."

"O.K." Sloshing the whiskey around, gazing up at his drink held high, he says, "This stuff jist like gettin n' education. It don' teach you nothin, jist like dem teachas don'. But whatevas inside a'you, dis bringz it out. If you mean inside, n'you drink some o'dis, you be the meanest sonovabitch aroun'. Ony time I cud git long wid my daddy wuz when he had some o'dis in 'em. Outside he wuz mean. But inside, ya see, he wuz a gooooooooood man! Down she goes!"

The next day Hank and I took Lester to the bus station in Saginaw. He was bound for Tampa with a thermos of coffee

and two packs of smokes. When the bus pulled in, he said goodbye and offered us one last story. He looked back and forth between us as he told it, smiling, but not blinking.

"One time wuz a monkey on dis boat, he wuz a pet o' the crew. Well sho nuff one day dey sprang a leak, n'da boat wuz sinkin straight down. Dat monkey wuz smart, see, so he got right up on top o'themast. Purty soon all dats left wuz dat monkey and one guy on the mast stickin outta the water. So the guy looked up at 'em and said 'Goodbye, little Monkey,' and dat monkey jist looked down at him a'laughin and said, 'Brother, I'm a gonna fly away.'" And Lester climbed into the bus.

THE FREE STATE

The ferryboat splashes through a wave, into the wind, and bobs down for another. I can see the roofs of the cars on deck shine with spray, and the line of them waiting across the straits. The days are measured this way. It chugs back and forth, each leg a half an hour, sometimes curving out into the fjord to miss the sand bars, but never losing time at it.

And I think, watching it disappear for a second, that I should have known it would turn out this way. Looking over as Mimi pulls bread from the oven, the smell charging through the cottage like blown fog, I know it was there those first days in Christiania. It was as predictable as that boat's shuttling, sho' 'z a piss 'n the monin', like Lester used to say. Though I couldn't see it then, was somehow hiding from the certainty, the recollection of how it unfolded makes it seem inevitable. You live life forward and understand it backward, Ed Mayo told me. So I guess the sure-seeming is just in the figuring it out later.

It's a shame that bread has to go straight into the freezer, but it's for the wedding next week. The lingering smell of it somehow reminds me of Christiania, too, the way all the loose dogs used to gambol around the bakery every morning, and the girl with no shirt on kneaded the heaps of

dough. Maybe it's our coming wedding that throws my thinking back there. These loafing afternoons seem perfect for pretending to size everything up, and although I should be sanding her loom and putting the finish on it, the memories keep surfacing.

How I got there to begin with seems to have contained some supernatural direction, when I think back on it. A Swedish businessman on the boat from England said he'd drive me across Denmark. He had a big Olds, maybe a sixty-seven, and after a long grey day of riding, dropped me off outside Copenhagen. It was just getting dark. So I walked a few miles toward the lights, wondering where I could sleep free, and came to an old woman waiting at a bus stop. She understood no English, but with sign language got it across that a bus would come in ten minutes, and I could find a place to sleep 'that way', wherever it was going.

The bus arrived, the seat was mighty comfortable, and right away I fell asleep. I woke up just as the driver turned off the engine at the bus station in the middle of the city. Now it takes a guy a few minutes to remember what the hell he's doing, waking up like that in a strange place, and before I got my bearings this driver hollered back to a couple of kids getting off the bus. The girl, quite young and pleasant looking, said, "You are looking for a place to sleep? Come with me." Didn't figure I had any choice, so I followed.

We got on a train, then walked, then took another bus. The girl kept talking to this odd-ball she was with, a skinny guy with teased hair, who was also wearing rouge and eye make-up. And he kept un-doing his pants to re-tuck his frilly shirt. His behaviour seemed to embarrass her, so that I guessed she was his sister. He clearly was a few bricks short of a full load, but I felt tremendous. There was this sense of adventure from the foreign country, the different language, and the way I was at the mercy of strangers, so I just puffed a cigarette and watched the fella worry his felt and pat his hair, waiting for something to happen.

When we got off the bus, we were left standing opposite a long block of grim brick tenement buildings, and next to a wall painted with graffiti. They crept along this wall looking for a way through, all the while looking to see if anyone had noticed us. "You smoke shit?" the girl asked me. It was nice to hear some words I understood, especially those words, so I grinned and nodded. When she asked me that, I knew that in the entire country of Denmark, this was where I belonged.

We came to the end of the wall, and entered a large open area. The path led to a group of small Gomer Pyle type barracks, and we walked along through them. They were painted on the sides with bright murals, piles of wood and junk surrounded them, and there was the faint whiff of piss

in the air. The girl pounded on the door of one of them, a dog started barking, a young guy opened the door, and we entered.

Inside the place there were no walls. At the far end sat two beds in the darkness, and in the front corner of the building was a make-shift kitchen and a table with a candle sitting on it. They started chattering in Danish, and the fella tossed a hunk of wood into the fifty gallon barrel that served as his fireplace. A short length of stovepipe supported a smaller barrel above the big one, and another length fit into the chimney in the center of the room.

After an animated conversation, during which the odd-ball dropped his trousers and rearranged his shirt six times, the girl explained that I could sleep here as long as I pleased, but that the owner, named Palle, couldn't speak English. She said that she and her friend had to leave soon, but that we would first have some tea to drink and hash to smoke. In one day I had crossed the country, got a place to sleep, and was waiting for a fat chillum of hash to come around. When it came I took a huge pull, nearly choking, then sat back and smiled at the tickle of possibility, the sense that some special experience was waiting and filling me with expectation.

2.

Three days later I awoke from a hash dream. A towering man dressed in black and carrying a book had been chasing me through deserted streets all night. Just before I opened my eyes he cornered me in an alley knee deep in garbage, and I couldn't move. The clunk of a log brought me out of it, and there stood Palle talking to a stranger. The dog, named Christian, was curled in his usual place under the table licking himself into a sexual frenzy. Palle shouted and gave him a kick. The stranger said, "Good morning, my name is Jorgen."

"Mornin," I said, sitting up and extending my hand, "Norman."

"I am going to buy some things for breakfast," he said. "Want to come along. I live here too."

We walked past the little houses onto a cobblestone street. The other buildings in the area were much bigger, all brick, and had few windows. "Every place in Christiania is a different sort of collective system," Jorgen said. "Some of the people work in their own workshops here, and others work outside." We passed a doorway from which the flicker of a welding rod emerged. A man inside was assembling an oil drum heating stove in a shower of sparks. Everywhere I looked along the streets laid piles of wood and rubbish, and near the psychedelic building where I'd smoked hash the day before amongst a motley collection of derelicts, I saw

two dogs snarl and start fighting.

"Who owns all of these dogs?" I asked. "They're running loose everywhere."

"Everybody."

Soon there were twenty dogs moiling around the fighters, all taking shots at the weakest one when there was an opening. They appeared to be mongrels with some Great Dane mixed in, and all of them were ugly. I recognized a few of them from the previous three days, and reconsidered the disgusting situation they created by prowling around in packs, sniffing each other, shitting, fucking, and fighting. They had their own society here in Fristaden (The Free State) Christiania, and no one paid much attention to them. Except to side-step the dung heaps. But then there was something delightful about the lack of order.

"This used to be a Navy base," Jorgen explained. "The government closed it five years ago and put fences around it. But those who live in the flats in this area like ants knocked down the walls to use it as a park. Then the Hippies, as they are called in America, started moving in and fixing up places to live. They started little work-shops, pubs, eating places, and even schools. Two years ago the government agreed to call it a social experiment, but now they say we must leave by April 1."

"How many people live here, then?"

"Around 800, but people are coming and going all the time."

"Are there any foreign vagrants other than me?"

"Some. You see, Norman, there are no laws here, so you can work if you want."

"How much money can I get for a day's work?"

"Most people take just what they need to live, to buy food and a little hash and beer, and give the rest to Christiania. All except the pushers. They are the only capitalists here. They make much money, and keep it."

"Well, thanks for the cultural overview, Jorgen." He smiled as I slapped him on the back. "You should be a teacher, you know that?"

"I don't understand that word you used there, but I can see you will like it here. You seem a bit crazy, like the rest of us. You should stay."

We entered a small grocery store. A pile of fresh bread and rolls sat on the counter, next to some scales. The girl behind the counter moved around getting people's goods from the shelves in back, while another girl scooped rice from a gunny sack. At one end of the store sat a heating stove, just like Palle's, surrounded by stuffed chairs and a sofa. Two men wearing heavy sweaters sat playing guitars. A third man, his hair tangled and filthy, prepared a chillum over a candle. Someone sleeping under a table in the corner stirred in his blanket. Jorgen spoke to the girl, who fetched eggs, butter, cheese, some sort of meat paste, and 10 bottles of Tuborg beer. I gave him some

money, he paid, and we knudged our way back outside.

On the street a fellow grabbed me. He reeked of sweat, hash, and urine. His clothes were rags, his eyes wouldn't focus, and he mumbled in a way that somehow indicated that he wanted money. "Englander, American?" he growled.

"Yes," I replied.

He snarled, spit at my feet, and shook my shoulder, digging his fingers in. A few of the words that came out in a torrent I recognized as "Fuck, shit." I glared at him like Edward G. Robinson, removed his hand, and turned away. The escape had been so easy that I had to swagger a little, and said to Jorgen, "That boy ain't in any shape fer a ruckus. Hell, I damn near had to wipe his nose for him."

"No," Jorgen said, chuckling. "There are some around here who have lost their minds on junk. Really they are more sick than dangerous."

"Hey, want to get something to smake after breakfast?" I asked.

"I can't smoke it," he said, "it makes me crazy."

"Ain't that the idea?" A spaniel bounded by chasing a grey mutt, scaring us.

"I have been a junkie," Jorgen said. I looked at him, noticing the pale, waxy skin, and the droopy flesh around his eyes, a tired expression that wouldn't go away. "I have stopped for two years, but still cannot smoke hash. So I

drink lots of beer."

"How long did you shoot it?"

"I did it for four or five years. Then some people here in Christiania took twenty-five junkies who wanted to stop to the Alps in Austria. We stayed there for two months, working around a big farm. When we came back only two people started doing it again."

"Christ, but that must've been hard."

"It was terrible. For one week I stayed in bed shaking, getting cold turkey, begging them to kill me. After some time I could work on the farm. I read the books of the American William Burroughs. They are tremendous books. They have been translated into Danish."

After that long confession, Jorgen got quiet. He seemed sad, maybe embarrassed for telling so much about himself to a relative stranger. And then I felt bad for firing so many questions at him. The silence hung between us like a dead man in a hammock. I started leaning toward my own darkness too, thinking of long months stoned, gripping a beer and scowling at barroom women. The self-pity I felt as I thought of it seemed silly, because I had been searching for rapture through pot and alcohol, while Jorgen next to me had dug his fingernails into the rust at the bottom of himself and come back through the torture of cold turkey. He had made my banal sufferings seem ridiculous.

As we walked along with our eyes in the dirt, a voice

called out, "Jorgen!" I turned to see a girl about Jorgen's age with henna-colored hair run up and embrace him. He introduced her as Merete. As they talked together in Danish I watched her face execute a range of expressions, accompanied by easy laughter, and liked her right away.

"So do you like this crazy place, Christiania?" she asked.

"Other than the dogs, it's interesting. Do you live here, too?"

"Oh, yes, I have a little house near here. But I come and go, like this beer king here," she grinned at Jorgen. "If you like to drink beer, you are living in the best place."

"Well, hell, I guess I never would've figured heaven was located in Denmark!"

"If you are looking for some work, I can maybe help you," she said. "I am taking care of this little food place on the weekends with some friends. It is upstairs from a big bar and music place, so the customers are usually quite injured and hungry when they come. They never complain about the food, though, they are too, what do you say, stoned?"

"Yea. And there is something I can do?"

"Well," she looked at Jorgen, "there is Lizzie, she is from Scotland, and Elsa and Mimi and me. And some of the work is carrying a heavy container of water up the stairs, so we could use your help."

"I can cook O.K. Sure, be glad to help out." I tried

to hide the twinge I felt when she named all of the women I would work with. I remember thinking that this was a perfect fox-in-the-henhouse situation. There had been the anticipation since I'd arrived that an adventure hovered about somewhere, and this turn had the promise of at least a little nocturnal exercise. The selfish imp of lechery, in his little corner of my mind that was never out of sight, raised an eyebrow, giggled, and began turning somersaults in my imagination. A few nights of acrobatics sounded just fine. But that they would be other than the usual temporary tumbles, or that soon the shoes of wandering would begin to pinch the calluses of dissipation, this I never considered.

3.

"I don't want to make love to you for several reasons," she said. I rolled away, silently cursing my luck.

"Is it the wrong time of the month?"

"That's one reason."

"What else?"

"Let's just hug and talk more, shouldn't we?" she replied.

"So, then, you've been teasing me all evening, haven't you? That first little kiss over the sink meant nothing."

"Don't say that, don't be so rough."

"Pass me that beer on the floor," I said. "Can I still sleep here?"

"Sure. It's nice and warm, isn't it?"

"I'll say!"

"You see, Norman, I worry about getting stuck too fast to people. And I came here to live in Christiania to have lots of experiences. Do you know what I mean?"

"Of course. Hell, I been pole vaulting around Europe, is all. You don't have to worry about me gettin' too sticky."

"What was that vaulting?"

"Oh, that's just a kind of sport in America. Nothing."

"It's hard not to with all this hugging."

"Damn, but ain't you nice!"

In the morning I heard someone holler that breakfast was ready. Mimi and I admired each other as we dressed, giggling and fooling around some. The breakfast table was covered with warm rolls, cheese, cereal, yogurt, and coffee. Karsten and Elsa, the others who lived in the house with Mimi, were sitting rubbing sleep from their eyes. Elsa had worked with us the night before, singing as she cooked, and smiling sideways at my courting of Mimi. Karsten, a shaggy rake of a guy in ragged but warm clothes, was opening a beer.

"I always save one for breakfast," he smiled. He still stank from the previous night's intake, and seemed to have been sleeping in the same clothes for weeks. "Mimi, can I have twenty krona until Tuesday?" he asked.

"Oh, Karsten, how could you spend the social help money already?"

"He was thirsty," said Elsa, "and smoking shit the whole time."

"As long as it was good, what the hell?" I said.

"Pooh, you are just as bad as he is. You don't do that all the time, do you?" The look in her eyes was critical, but teasing.

"If you don't keep a little medicine in your system, you are more susceptible to disease. Right, Karsten?"

"Yes, I like that one. I haven't been sick for a long time."

"Day before yesterday," Mimi corrected him. "Has anyone told you about Christiania?" she asked me.

"A little. I know that both hash and dog shit are very easy to find here."

"Oh, you are a shit boy, alright. Did you know that there will be a big demonstration on April 1 against the government? Many thousands of people will come. We are working now to organize it."

"They will have a Rainbow Army. All the different groups will have a color. All of us who work in food places or pubs will wear green," Elsa continued. "But maybe you shouldn't go. The police are not good to foreigners, if they catch you here in Christiania."

"He looks Danish enough," Mimi said, with a nice smile. There was also a light in her eyes that frightened me. Not so much the flicker of it, but the way I noticed it,

the response somewhere inside my rib cage, was troublesome. She seemed to be teasing me and encouraging me at once. What she'd said the night before about independence and experience was no longer so convincing.

"And the pushers will also have a color," Karsten said. "They will wear red, for their eyes." He laughed, then hunched in self-parody when the girls knifed him with their eyes.

"You know, there were groups in America a few years ago who tried to fight the government. They weren't so successful. Mostly they wasted their energy on drugs, and then the war ended. It's fine to try all this political stuff, but I'm afraid you'll be disappointed."

"Did you do any of those political things?" Elsa asked.

"Well, I held back and observed it all from afar."

"You mean from a chair in a pub?" Mimi jabbed at me.

"This is the problem here in Christiania. Only two hundred people work hard, come to the town meetings and deal with the outside. The rest sit playing music and smoking shit the whole time, talking much about how terrible the system is. But then they do nothing but make noise. It is like this Greek one, Narcissus."

"Yes, too many just study their own reflection in everything," Elsa said.

"You care for some Foo-zee-chong?" Karsten asked. He had filled his cup with warm milk, and was stirring in

some brown powder.

"That looks like camel shit," I said, "what is it?"

"Chinese speed."

"He needs it every morning, so he has energy to go to the grocery to buy more beer," Mimi said. Karsten laughed, and asked again for some money. "Karsten, you are no junkie anymore. And you shouldn't spend all this money on beer."

"Did you go to Austria with Jorgen?" I asked.

"Yes," he answered. "Today, generals Mimi and Elsa, I shall get the tractor and pick up garbage around. You want to help, Norman? We get free beer, but no pay." It sounded crazy, but I felt an urge to impress this girl, to contribute something to this community, not for any social ideals I entertained, but for her. She was challenging me, with subtle pressure, and I was accepting it without imagining where it would lead.

"For a few beers this hombre'll do damn near anything," I said, feeling the tickle come from her eyes again.

4.

"Your temperature is still near 38°," I told her. Mimi was curled in the bed, flushed with color and feeling miserable. Her thick red pajamas that I'd just washed felt soft. "Damn, you sure look like a good cuddle."

"Come down here, won't you?" she pleaded. I wrapped her in my arms, groaning, and she wailed like a siren. The

heat of her fevered skin was enticing, but I checked myself because she was sick. "You are so nice for such a shit boy," she said. "Why are you so nice to me?"

"Guess I can't help it. Maybe because you give me such a hard time. You don't deserve such a nurse, though, do you?"

"Oh, sure I do," she said, squeezing me. "Just stay right here with me all day, won't you?"

"Can't. Gotta finish the little rock wall around the garden out front. Did you notice that someone planted flowers out there where I raked it up?"

"That was nice. No, I think you better stay here."

"Two weeks ago when I moved into this hen house of ambition you said I was lazy. Now you want me to waste the whole day pokin' that thermometer in yer ass!"

"That's right. It's too late to change you now. You have permission to be lazy today."

"Bullshit. And you better quit yer low down ways. I'm goin out to work."

"You certainly are a shit boy." She gave me another hug. "Come back in here to me sometimes, please? I am just a sick and helpless woman."

"Serves ya right fer bein so ornery." I kissed her. "See you in awhile, sweet teeth. And leave them candy bars alone."

5.

I could smell the vinegar on my hands, and the bandages made cutting difficult. The slices of garlic came off as thick as quarters, but the cheese still held them down on the bread. When I bit into the sandwich, saliva squirted around in there, so I had to take three long pulls on the jug of cabbage juice. It was the first day since the diet started that the reek of garlic didn't bother me.

Karsten walked in.

"Whew!" he hissed, gripping his nose.

"Well, Christ, they told me to eat three cloves of this a day," I told him.

"What did they tell you about your hands today?"

"They cleaned them, put more of that bee's wax on the sores, and said if I follow the juice and garlic diet it'll go away in maybe three weeks. Ain't this a sonofabitch, though?"

"Everyone has had this. We call it Christiania disease."

"The girl at the hospital called it 'staphylococcus'."

"The smallest poke gets white and spreads."

"And it hurts like hell. It's gotta be because of the fuckin dogs around here. They keep things plenty filthy."

"Didn't they give you any blood-cleaning tea?"

"Of course, but it tastes like snake piss. You carryin any medicine today?"

He reached deep into a pocket of his baggy coat and produced two beers. "You feel for smoking hash?" he asked.

I was embarrassed to answer, to reveal what had been happening to me. But as I said "Nope, thanks anyway," I had to admit to myself that she had me. The old indulgences had paled in intensity next to the feeling Mimi had planted in me. And though I was by no means reformed, I knew that those vegetable highs had lost their control of rapture. I began to see the long debauchery as a substitution of feeling, a kind of hiding place where drug numbness snuffed the pain. I took a drink of beer as Karsten sliced himself some cheese. More pain comin, sure, I thought, and plenty of beer and smoke, but now it'll be to bury something else.

"When does Mimi come back from Amsterdam?" he asked.

"Tuesday."

"She'll be sorry of your hands. That's what happens when you work, you see. Better to take it easy. Beer is good for you."

"Yup, but lately I been thinkin there's some things better."

He smiled. "I have noticed. You are lucky. See you later."

I swallowed the last of the bread and made a fist. The bandages pulled, the tiny sores biting in like Canadian mosquitos. From cuttin firewood, pickin up garbage, and cleanin that bar, I thought. The smallest scratch festered.

From playin in the dirt of this 'social experiment', amidst dog shit and junkie sperm. Tryin to keep clean and warm while half of the revolutionaries sucked chillums, banged guitars, and talked freedom. And drank beer and fucked the closest one at midnight. Lived like the dogs around them, pissin wherever was convenient and sniffin around for whatever bitch might be in heat next. While the rest of the people cleaned up after em, contained em, demonstrated, wrote, painted, fought the government for em. But they're better off. Some of em came around. Better than outside, in jails or funny-farms. All at once one would want to make ceramics, or run the bathhouse, or play the flute in front of people. Some sat all day, singin "You can do the welfare rag, just, wait in line!" Fuckin that system. Stopped fuckin themselves, but so slow. And if they had to leave April 1, where? Where could those drug burn-outs find a meal for a dollar, or get their stuff without robbin somebody? Where else?, they asked the government. Anywhere, was the answer. Bulldozer man said he was ready to knock Christiania down. To put those condominiums up. Condoms. Get that Big Coin from the Germans. Fatten that krona. Saw the girl who was thrown out of parliament for nursin her baby, approaching with Elsa. Tell us about Christiania they asked her. But hold it, get out with that baby. No milk in here, no sweet tit. Who said you should stay there? they asked. Those kids should be in our schools. Get her oughta

here with that kid. She smiled while the politicians stared. Never saw a tit before.

I broke out of the reverie. "Hi, Elsa."

"Hi, Norman. What are you doing? You stink of garlic."

"Thinkin about Christiania," I told her, "gettin mad, and tryin to make myself a radical."

"Well, this is something new. What will happen to you next?" She smiled. "There is a man from Scotland in the circus tent," she pointed, "playing that plaid instrument."

"Bagpipes."

"He does this funny dance, wearing special clothes. Lizzie is dancing with him. Shall we go and watch?"

"O.K."

"O.K., spaghetti Yankee." She doubled over giggling. I was still hot from the interior monologue about junkies and governments, and maybe from the change inside, the growing pains, a sort of mild cold turkey. But there stood Elsa, pointing, pinching her nose, and laughing the rage away.

6.

"You like me a wee bit, don't you shit boy?" Mimi asked. Her wide-set blue eyes pretended interrogation as she kissed both sides of my nose.

"Just a wee bit, alright," I responded, squeezing.

There was a smell of strawberries, or maybe it was a taste, that stuck to her just then, but I said nothing. It seemed a syrupy observation, but there it was. "I just might be in love with you, though," I teased.

"Do you want to come to Jylland with me after April 1? You can meet my parents, and we can stay in their cottage. You can read that White Goddess book while I write my report on Christiania for school."

"What happened to all the political idealism?"

"It's tired. And you're tired of the city, too, you said. We should do that then, shouldn't we?"

"I'll come for awhile. But I think I'll take a little vacation to Greece. You can write better that way, if I'm gone, and we can both think this over." She leaned back, searching my face. I studied the red cheeks, the crooked mouth that made a little space between the lips where a tooth shone through. She fixed me with her eyes, and I gazed down into the blue where I'd lived for three months. They reflected the intangible discovery I'd made, and asked a question of possibility. She held the stare. The sequence of events that led me to that point flashed by, images of Lake Michigan, the Atlantic from the jet's window, the wake of the ferry on the North Sea, Denmark's grey coast, Christiania, they flashed like a pack of riffled cards that stopped at Mimi's face. I felt that there had to be some explanation, some resolution or answer in the sequence, but

couldn't put words on it. Just her face. I said nothing for fear of cliché', as I leave off explaining it now, in the looking back, because the attempt would be wrinkled with triteness. There just weren't words for the space in there, in the intestines of emotion.

"I'll come down to you in the summer, and we can come back together." She broke my reverie, embracing me with arms and eyes. I squeezed until she howled and pounded my back. "But my God, Norman, do you ever smell bad!" she said wincing.

7.

They're still out there in Christiania. Mimi is asleep now, the bread's put away, and the ferry's on the way back. They had the government tied up in court, so the demonstration on April 1 was just a show of strength. There must have been 6000 people, though. I got up late, and saw that a street theater group had a crowd around them just outside the front door. People were sitting along the low rock wall I'd built, and standing five deep around the yard. Faces peered past heads, kids were up on shoulders, and the actors were painted for the show. Two men and three women, clown-faced, simulated a tug-of-war. They stared up at their imaginary adversary, some kind of monster, and were losing. They'd dig their feet in, lean back, and lose ground to it. The clown in back gestured to a sixth,

who sat against a rock holding a beer in his hand. He wore shabby clothes, and looked at the reflection of his scowling face in a mirror. He sipped the beer, paying no attention to them.

The monster soon had the others on their knees. The scowling clown put the mirror aside, stood, and seemed to suddenly notice the situation. The others were each waving an arm, beckoning to him for help. He tipped up the bottle, drained it, and stretched. Then, with a shrug, he took hold of their rope with one hand and tugged a little. That brought the others to their feet, leaning backward. He grabbed the rope with his other hand, leaned himself, and they started gaining, pulling the monster back until it let go. They tumbled into a heap on top of one another. As the crowd started to applaud, they leapt up, slapping the shabby clown on the back, his teeth smiling through the scowl.

"Wasn't that great?" Mimi said from the doorway.

"Where is Karsten, he should be seeing this."

"I am the hero!" he shouted. I turned to see him leaning out the kitchen window. "Feel for a taste?" He handed me a beer.

"We walk into Copenhagen in half an hour," Mimi said. "Karsten, put the Danish flag on Norman's back, so the police won't bother him."

"Yea," I said, "where's that bugle?"

"The what?"

"Hey, look, here comes the bear." An old pickup truck with side panels eased through the crowd. A black bear stood with his chest and arms resting on the cab. The fellow who owned him, looking insignificant beside his pet, handed him a large jar of beer. The bear leaned back, tipped it up, and emptied it. The crowd turned to watch, amazed. The bear followed the chug with a belch and some satisfied rumbling sounds. Foam still dripped down his chin into the fur on his belly. Everyone roared.

"Amazing!"

"We are good friends, this bear and I," Karsten grinned.

"Let's go," Mimi said, grabbing my arm. "Let's get this finished so we can go to the cottage tomorrow. So many people here."

And now we're back at this cottage again. I must admit that I wasn't sure I would be when I left for Greece that spring. But I should've known better. Just couldn't get back into the old nihilism. Couldn't forget her, because I never really wanted to. Hell, she's slept long enough. Too many things to do to get ready for next week. Maybe I should get the cornet out, and see about makin some music. Maybe serenade the folks on that ferry.

NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN

The drop of moisture clinging to the end of his nose jiggled as he spoke. "But I haven't touched a drop of spirits all day. If I can just get on the train to Holland without starting again, perhaps I can find a job up there. I've kicked it before, Yank, and I can bloody well do it again." He took a drink of beer. "I've at least got to get rid of the bloody shakes, you know."

Eric Sorensen shifted in his chair and looked away from the old man, Gordon. The little cellar cafe' was dark, but the dampness made it cool. A shaft of light came down the stairwell, and the honking of cars from the street above reminded him of the hot, chaotic Athens evening. The old man made him nervous with his shaking and the desperate waver in his voice. Eric eyed the droplet of moisture under his nose as he asked, "So how long have you been into the bottle, then?"

Gordon took a cigarette and tried to light it from the butt of the one he'd just finished. Eric reached over and held his hand still. "I left Washington four months ago with three suitcases full of clothes," he replied. "Now there's just that one bag left. Stolen, all of it stolen. One night I shared some drinks with one of my own countrymen. He put me to bed, you see, I couldn't walk.

When I woke up one suitcase was gone. My own countryman, can you believe that?" Eric shook his head, looking away. "Why, here, here's what I left with. Look here."

From a pocket inside the threadbare suit coat he produced a bank book and thrust it across the table. On November 17 it showed a balance of \$4,772.00. The last total read \$317.00. "Now there's only 150 quid left," Gordon whined. "It's only today I realized what happened, that I had to stop drinking. I was staying in nice hotels, then, but they'd throw me out. The last month I was in Pireaus, a very nice hotel, mind you, but today they threw me out. They said other guests had complained. I'd only walk in the hallways and talk to them. But I must've been pissed, I remember so little of it. My room was so full of bottles that you couldn't get in. Why, they made me pay \$50.00 for burns in the carpet. Three bottles a day I was drinking, gin whiskey rye, anything. When one was gone I'd go find another, or go to a pub if it was late. Three bottles. If I don't stop now I don't know what will happen. Just don't let me take any spirits, do you hear, Yank?"

"No spirits," Eric said.

The waiter brought two more bottles of beer. Gordon insisted on paying. "No, no," he said, "I asked you to have a couple of beers with me. Just drink some beer and chat a bit, that's all. Here, take a cigarette, please, have what you want." Eric accepted a cigarette and tried to relax.

As he passed the matches back across the table his hand seemed to jump sideways and his beer was knocked to the floor. The waiter hurried over with a rag. "Looks like you've got the bloody shakes too, old boy," Gordon smiled. "See, you're making me feel better already."

Eric smiled and looked over at Gordon's eyes. There was yellow foam at the corners. The skin under each eye showed thin rivulets of red veins, and the pale light in them seemed to focus backward into his brain and then go out. The man could be 45 or 65, he was thinking. His skin is slack as grey wax. Now what do I do about him, how do I escape from him, goddamn is he in bad shape.

Gordon was lighting another cigarette, fumbling with the previous butt. The two fingers that pinched the fresh one were stained dark brown to the knuckles. When it was lit the hand holding the butt arched spastically in front of his face and the ash wiped the droplet of moisture from his nose. It hissed as he cast it on the floor and put his heel on it.

"I used to work for the Pentagon, mind you. I spoke six languages fluently, but the best was Greek. They had me in a closet office translating official documents they'd intercepted from the Junta. Helluva pack of bastards that government was, I tell you. Worse than the fucking Nazis, they were. But then I started drinking again . . . only a little at first, see, but worse and worse. When they let me

go I put all my belongings in three suitcases, three big ones, I tell you, and flew to France. And that's when everything went to bloody hell, then."

He called out to the waiter ordering two more. Eric said no, he had some left. "That's O.K. mate, that's O.K., you'll get to it, sure, just stay and give a bloke a bit of company, will you, just need some company now, O.K.?"

"Sure," Eric told him, "Fine. But we gotta git you on a train north, or you'll be drunk, broke, and sittin' in a Greek jail. Right?"

Gordon lowered his eyes, then said, "I'm alright on beer and wine, I tell you, just don't let me have any spirits, O.K., no bloody spirits."

"No spirits, and no thirty beers, either. After this one we walk to the train station, you hear Gordon?" This made the old man pout, but he quieted down. Eric finished his beer and started on the next one. A Greek soldier bent over the jukebox in the corner inserted some coins and sat back down at his table. A few deliberate chords on a 'bazooki' preceded a plaintive voice in a haunting, solitary song. Eric felt the beer start numbing him, thinking I'll end up like him if I keep roaming goddamn pointless wandering drinking away the loneliness like him should've stayed there with her on the fjord stayed put learned her patience instead of fleeing again back on the road to drink and look for what with wrecks like this guy and his empty fish eyes yea I should maybe feel lucky I can still change it . . .

"A've a fag then Yank, c'mon." As the pack was passed across the table Eric noticed that Gordon's hand no longer was shaking. "How do you do it, Yank?"

"Do what?"

"Just wander around Europe this way . . . That's your only luggage, isn't it . . . I mean don't you have family back in the States or a missus somewhere? What are you doin' in Greece with these bloody bastards, then, it's as good as hell isn't it?"

"Thought I'd look around some, that's all. Got tired of workin' 'n wanted some sun," Eric answered, thinking good as hell alright with a missus somewhere weavin' those socks for me lookin' out the window at the larch I planted no gotta quit grindin' on it now I'm here quit thinkin' so much about her since I'll probably have to go back anyway no no use grindin' now . . .

"And it doesn't bother you going by yourself wherever the wind blows, like they say, that doesn't make it bad for you then? I just don't understand how someone can do it!"

"Figured I needed it."

"Oh, Jesus Christ Yank you've got it then, you've got it alright because I can't do it Yank, mind you, other men get lonely and do something about it, get married or drink or something. Mind you, that's fine that you've got it, but some are just born losers, that's all, born losers, you hear, and that's God's bloody truth, that is!"

There was another drop of moisture on the end of his nose, another cigarette burning down near his fingers, and another beer bottle empty.

"Get up, Gordon, we're goin' t' the train station."

"We've got time for one more, for the road, eh, sit down and 'ave one more Yank, what?"

"Nope. Let's go, I'm gettin' you on a train."

Shaking again, Gordon got to his feet. He wore no socks in the scuffed oxford shoes, and Eric had to wait at the top of the stairs. It was cooler on the street now, but the cars still raced along, honking at each intersection. He hoisted the green duffel bag onto his shoulder, saw Gordon come lugging his black satchel, and headed down Papodistriou St. toward Syntagma Square.

The Plaka was a chaos of young Greeks and tourists. Hawkers in front of discoteques interrupted the flow along the narrow sidewalk, and each time he waited for Gordon to dislodge himself from the crowd Eric noticed the prostitutes, eyes heavy with mascara, peering out from doorways. One spoke to him, saying, "Oreos (good looking)" as she ran her hand through his hair, but he kept walking.

"Shouldn't we just stop in one of these pubs for a beer, Yank?" Gordon panted. He had shifted the satchel to his left hand and seemed to be limping.

"Nope."

"How far is it then, there must be a pub at the train

station. I'll buy the ticket and we can 'ave one there, what?"

"Bout twelve blocks," Eric said. They turned down a deserted lane at the edge of the Plaka and lit cigarettes. Gordon began talking, but he ignored it. Catch an island ferry tomorrow he was thinking get away from this madness doe-eyed whores and expensive wine find a beach on Kos find some work and just sit tight on little money and think it over when I'll be ready to go back when the road sickness gets too strong and go back to stop it once and for all yea maybe find work somewhere for awhile and git me a beach bunny hell yes find some loose Australians birds they call 'em or else a Turk for the exercise they kiss with the teeth remember the one in Nice called me a chauvinist well hell yes she wanted to do it anyway and was doin' the usin' just like me she said we all are all of us travellers after the fleeting fuck but when does it stop no no use grindin' on it just find somethin' to squeeze for now you old cunt hound . . .

At Syntagma Square they passed the sidewalk cafe's full of tourists. A tuxedoed fiddler walked from table to table singing in a high fine tenor, always smiling. Waiters hurried about in black, holding trays of lamb, shish-kebob, heaped salads, and bottles of retsina. One stopped Eric and placed a hand on his shoulder saying, "You want zumtheeng to eat, mister, I have fried cheeken for you, stop, zprecken zee Doytsch, are you Amereecan, come come, tsit down, tsit

down," but when he saw Gordon he moved away into the kitchen.

Goddamn hungry smells good gotta git some eats but
too expensive here maybe by the train station git some
mousaka cheese and wine gotta git him on that train though
no spirits hope it goes tonight and then I find a bed oh
there's a nice lookin' blond one Scandinavian maybe Danish
too could practice the tongue oh where the hell has he
gone . . .

Gordon's satchel sat on the sidewalk outside a cafe' door. A waiter going by with a full tray kicked it to the wall, and Eric let his pack down to wait.

"Hello," the blond girl said. She was thin, tall, and Eric thought Swedish from her accent. He smiled at her friend, who was fatter and looked up at him past a creamed nose.

"Been on an island?" he asked.

"We are coming from Kriti," the thin one said.

"We must fly home tomorrow," her friend added.

"Aww, that's a shame," Eric pouted. He liked the airy lifts at the ends of their words. "Where's home?" he looked at the thin one.

"Sweeedn," she answered. "And you are American?"

"Yes. Michigan."

"You look VERY SWEEEEEdish," the plump one said.

"'Ad t' use the loo, Yank." Gordon emerged from the cafe. "Found some birds, eh? Shall we sit and 'ave a beer, then?"

"You're welcome to sit with us," said the fat one.

"Thanks, but gotta catch a train. Let's go, Gordon. Farvell!" Eric shouldered his pack.

"What's the bloody rush then Yank, nothing wrong with an innocent beer, and the birds fancied you as well, what?" Gordon struggled to keep up.

"Bullshit," he replied, thinking Shouldn't be so hard on the old guy but gotta see him on that train can't handle this any more maybe they'll still be there later no forget it . . .

2.

Eric tossed the last polished spoon into the tray of silverware. The thunder outside interrupted the shouts of the waiters, and the clink of dishes from the sink where old Papa Yanni leaned. Kosmas sat near the swinging doors to the dining room counting the money and sipping from his glass of whiskey. The fight was over. The two waiters, Panayoti and Spiros, passed in and out of the kitchen without looking at each other. Five minutes earlier they had thrown trays of food, punches, and kicks. Nothing had landed. The cook's helpers, maitre d'hotel, and other waiters, dashing from different areas of the crowded kitchen, had separated the two boys. The mess was cleaned up, and the other waiters resumed their smiles each time they passed out into the dining room. Each time they

returned through the swinging doors their eyes widened, they crowded around the counter, and began shouting, shadow boxing, and laughing. Papa Yanni looked at Eric and tilted his nose upward sounding the shaming cluck with his tongue, "Tt." The cook walked back to where Eric sat polishing knives. He was wiping fish guts from his hands, and his neck and face were still red from the excitement. "Fucking Greek mentality!!" he snarled. Eric shook his head smiling. He put down rag and knives and walked out the back door.

Rainin' pitchforks, he thought, lookit that black cloud aroun the mountain how's the line go 'the belly of a cat wending its way secretly home at daybreak' yea that's it perfect hasn't rained in weeks but knocks pink petals from the oleander wonder if Mimi got them in the envelope and the mint leaves awful sorry letter such self-pity but can't help grinding on it now down in that dungeon the whole goddamn time volatile Greeks like a prison here but then I asked for the job asked for the self-pity the whining letters to her ridiculous to cry about it but no wonder those boys lose it workin three times a day seven days a week wish I could've understood the hollerin though Christ were they ragin awful poor fighters just noisy and hot-blooded but one more week of this for me should be plenty . . .

"Is your work finished, Erico?" Eric looked back at Jorgo, his fat bulldog face and perpetual scowl.

"Just takin' a break," he replied. "Goddamn noisy down there."

"The boys get sometimes excited. Say they will quit. You make it worse, you quit next week, make them restless. Bat for them to see someone who is just a bum, no responsibilities. But no one else quits."

"You ever get sick of this place?" Eric asked. "Workin' seven days a week, kissin' the fat German tourist's asses all the time?"

"I kiss nobody's ass!" Jorgo barked, heating up.

"That ain't what I asked," Eric glared back.

Jorgo's liver-colored lips rolled outwards as he took a breath. "Why you think I drink all the day, eh? Somebody has to run this place. Somebody don't like the way I run it, they can go. I put no fucking chains on nobody. You don't like it here, want to quit, quit, rynow if you want, I don't stop you. I know you don't like it, you want to bum around, so you quit next week. Fine. You want to quit rynow fine, just don't come bitching to me, understant? I tell you this one month ago when you start, I tell you same thing rynow . . .

"And you've told me the same thing every single day I've been here, Jorgo," Eric interrupted. "When do you leave this place?"

"We close in September or October. Then we have GOOT time, eh?!" He punched Eric in the shoulder, jumping from ornery to delighted in a split second. "Yea, then me and Kosmas go to New York, eh, going all winter to the race track and fucking plenty of women, eh? You like the sound of this,

eh, Erico? You meet us there in winter and we all have GOTdamn GOOT time! You coming?

"Think I'll miss it, Jorgo. Can't afford that shit. Probably won't be back over there anyway. You boys have a good time."

"Don' you worry about that!" he said through a belly laugh, "GOTdamn GOOT time!!"

The rain had stopped while they talked, and the black cloud moved away from the mountain in the center of the island. A few bolts of lightning touched the mountains of Turkey across the straits, 20 miles south. Toward the village to the north the sun shone on the wet green olive groves and the fenced mine fields. A greek soldier emerged from a pile of brush that hid an underground shelter and looked across at the lightning through binoculars. Then he turned, scanning the beach where the tourists sunbathed. Eric waited until the binoculars pointed toward the hotel, and then waved. The soldier lowered the binoculars at once and waved back.

Poor bastard drafted for three years three dollars a day to bake in that hole and look at Turkey nothing but spiny mountains and soldiers that look over here so they see each others reflection in the lenses like I saw mine in Gordon maybe or Jorgo just like the soldier looking at the blond tourists stretching swimming squirting hot cream between their legs down there and then maybe has to go someplace and

get his hand on it or could be the soldiers do it all
together down in there in a circle no that's silly no use
thinkin' such shit when she's way up north maybe found some-
body else to touch that baby skin hafta go to town check for
mail later she still writes love though don't worry about it
gotta stop thinkin' this way maybe meditate on the beach
stop the stream of thoughts or else I'll have to get my hand
on it too no goddamit that's foolish just get back to work
and stop . . . His feet squished in the rubber sandals as
he walked back into the kitchen.

3.

There she is in the corner purple sweater looking at
me what's she saying music's so loud why do they sing it in
English 'You keep on knockin' but you can't come in' drummer's
playin' another song can't get through all those dancers hash
smoke so thick can't see her face gotta get through no thanks
no chillum who was he with nose dripping can't see her face
she's touching him over there black hair smiling at me huge
white teeth why do they push me back always stop the music
please let me through looking at me again can't see grey
smoke in my eyes where's her face waiting for me there now
it stopped no this is a forest now green brambles can't get
through that's her running away brown hair flying why is she
running away I CAN'T MOVE brambles digging in green forest
music's stopped where are all the dancers I CAN'T MOVE why

can't I remember her face I CAN'T MOVE I CAN'T

He woke up with a start, felt the sweat on his back, the fly biting, tried to move his right arm to kill it but it was pinned under his chest asleep. The dream faded, a girl with no face that he loved dissolving in the sound of the waves. Eric rolled over and shook his right arm. The jagged bleached rocks along the shore blinded him. He heard the squawk of a magpie, and squinted over the water to where the mountains of Turkey jutted dark green into the blue-white sky. As his eyes adjusted he watched the moss-covered rock off shore disappear under a wave and then emerge again, the moss floating, then matting down on the rock. His toes twiddled in the gritty sand and shells.

Sitting up, he looked along the beach. There was nothing but the formations of rock leaning down to the shore. Near the shore the rocks were smaller, and spaced so that solitary patches of sand hid the tourists who walked this far to swim and sunbathe in the nude. He could see no one.

He stood then, stretching shoulders and legs. Still no one appeared. With tentative steps, the broken shells and stones of the beach smarting on his feet, he walked down and into the sea. When the swells reached his waist he scratched his pubic hair and genitals, and studied the phosphorescence of bubbles in the water. There was a slight numbing. He surfaced from the dive spitting, but the salt

taste remained, and his beard itched from the mingling of sweat and salt water. Eyeing the shore and rolling onto his stomach, he kicked and stretched his arms into a breast stroke. On the bottom his shadow mimicked each movement, the shadow of exhaled air trailing to the side like black smoke. The regular motion and breathing, the flow of waves, and the sun on his shoulders drained the tension from his body. Every fifth stroke he raised his head to locate the mossy rock.

He swam the last 100 meters on his back, feeling the waves buoy him up. The mountain rising up from the beach lay bathed in intense light, the golden grainy sunlight of Greece. He smiled at the green mountain, the splotches of pink oleander in the ravines, the ominous glide of the hooded crows near the peak, and at the nub of his penis poking up out of the water. Purple little one-eyed trouser snake he thought and squirted a stream of urine toward the sky. A shriek of utter joy ripped from his lungs, but it made him swallow water, so that he had to right himself while choking and laughing simultaneously. Someone was walking up the beach now, 200 meters from his rock. A woman long black hair slim haven't seen her at the hotel . . . He turned toward the shore, watching her slow tread through the sand.

Eric felt the woman looking at him from the corner of her eye as he waded onto the beach. He shook water from his hair, smiled, and looked straight into her eyes as she

neared the spot where he stood.

"Hello," she returned his greeting. "You look just like a Greek God walking out of the water, did you know that?" The ease of the remark showed no embarrassment at his nadedness. Without looking away he reached down for his towel, covering himself in the act of drying.

"Are you Greek?" he asked.

"No, I am Italian," she responded, "And you?"

"American. I wash dishes at the hotel down there." She gave a little laugh, trying to break his stare. Her look and manner had disarmed him, but he broke out of the trance. "Sorry," he said, "But you're very nice to look at."

"Oh, thank you," she laughed again. "And so are you." She looked down at her feet. "May I share your sunning spot for a little while?"

He looked at her face again. Her eyes were large, big brown spaniel eyes he thought, the cheeks almost prominent, lips thin and subtley curved down at the corners. Her body was lean and angular, and tawny from the sun. There was a black birthmark near her left ear, partly hidden by hair, and a thin crease of scar tissue showed itself on her chin when she smiled. "Of course you may," he answered. "You know, you look like you could be an American Indian. From the shape of your face and the color of your skin, I mean."

"Yes, but I don't have a bow and arrow," she laughed.

"I ain't so sure," Eric said, staring again. She patted her hand to her rounded lips, making a sound like the Indian war-cry, then looked at him as they laughed together.

4.

Kosmas lit Eric's cigarette from across the table and extinguished the match with a deft flick of his finger. His tall, lean body was deeply tanned, and the irridescent blue shirt open at the chest showed grey and black tendrils of hair. "How old do you think I am?" he asked, with blue eyes flashing. "Look at my body, not at my face!"

"Forty," Eric answered.

"Ah, you look at my face! My body looks thirty, but I am thirty-nine years old. Nearly an old man." He drank from the glass of whiskey with a theatrical sweep of the arm, as if to shoo away the thought of age. "I have been sailing on the Greek ships for twenty years, Erico. To India, Japan, Australia, and America. My English is very good, don't you think? Next I will learn French. By next summer I will speak it perfectly. It is a beautiful language, so sensual, so smooth, you must kiss the air as if it were a beautiful woman." He puckered and kissed the air, eyes wide. As he spoke his fingers kneaded the air with nimble articulation.

"But let me tell you a story about a beautiful woman.

We Greeks love to talk of such women, to touch them too, yes, to awaken the fires in their bodies. Ah, Erico, when I make love to a beautiful woman I like to leave the light on, to proceed slowly, to sip of her body and drink long of her love. To look at the soft skin, touching it everywhere. You must keep the light on to enjoy, to savor the experience, Erico!"

"Bullshit!" Jorgo interrupted. "If you had such a woman now Kosmas you would fuck her like a horse." Kosmas' eyes flashed like razor blades as he looked at his friend. They exchanged several sentences of Greek rapid fire, shouting and gesticulating. Kosmas unleashed a long sentence, nearly spitting. A group of the young waiters, smoking and talking at a table nearby, all looked toward Kosmas and began laughing and cheering. Jorgo broke into a belly laugh. Kosmas calmed, looked back at Eric with a wry smile, and continued the even phrases of English.

"But mostly we Greeks love to talk about sex, about beautiful women."

"I've noticed that," Eric said, "But so it is everywhere."

"Ah, yess, Erico, but it is not the same." He waved a scolding finger. "I was once in Cuba, on a ship. One night I was in Havana, drinking with my friends. We passed a theater, with a picture of a black man and a white woman making love. 'Come inside and see the white princess and

the black devil' the sign said. My friends went on to another bar, but I paid and entered the theater. It was dark inside, and on the stage was a bed with a blue light above it."

The waiters from the other table had moved their chairs over to listen. They watched Kosmas' soliloquy with wide eyes, some whispering quick translations to those who understood little English. He seemed to gain energy from his audience, for he rolled his eyes and used his entire body to supplement his speech. But he continued to look at Eric.

"Suddenly a white woman walked to the edge of the bed and slowly took off her robe. She stretched and yawned, the robe piled at her feet. Her hair was long and golden, her breasts perfect, her skin as white as the foam on a pail of fresh goat's milk. She was beautiful, Erico, Stunningly beautiful!"

One of the young waiters began snickering. It infected the others, and grew into loud laughter. Eric couldn't help smiling with them at the act, the hyperbole and exaggerated gestures of Kosmas' tall tale. He's got it bad too never drops the role but maybe he's hustling me with stories of beautiful women yea Lea she said her name was staying on the other side of the island to decide why she left her husband funny coincidence may still be there next week and there's room for you sure she said I should go there

tomorrow what sense in waiting but only a warm kiss today a
promise maybe at least stopped the grinding about Mimi and
Denmark for awhile there comes the moon over Turkey it's
full incredible Golden Goddess golden like Mimi's skin in
the morning white princess . . .

Kosmas, Jorgo, and the young Greeks were all shouting at once. Eric leaned back in his chair, realized Kosmas wouldn't get to finish his bawdy story, and so turned to look around the patio and into the lounge where the tourists sat drinking, talking, and playing cards. Strains of Greek music floated up from the little 'Disco' down by the pool. A tall Swedish woman walked by, looked at no one, and descended the steps toward her bungalow. After she passed Jorgo brought laughter from the Greeks with some profane remark, Eric guessed, but Kosmas leaned across the table, filled Eric's glass with whiskey, rose, and followed her down the steps with the half bottle of Johnny Walker still in his hand. Jorgo shouted something as he left, but he didn't turn around.

"Tomorrow is my last day," Eric said to Jorgo.

"Where you going then?" he demanded.

"To the other side of the island, to the beach. I will eat souvlacki, drink retsina all the day, and rub oil on all the women's bodies. My skin will become brown and I will never think about this hotel again." He grinned.

"Bravo! Erico, bravo!" said one of the young waiters,

named Vassilli. "Kaimakki. I would like to go with you."

"What does that word 'Kiamakki' mean?" Eric asked him.

"I tell you one word if you tell me one," Vassilli replied. "Kaimakki is the sweet foam on top of the Greek coffee you get, Kaimakki. And so it also means 'The Sweet Life'."

"Perfect," Eric smiled. "The sweet life. Now what is your word?"

"Yes, Erico, what does this word 'decadence' mean?" Eric laughed aloud, wondered where Vassilli heard the word, and swept his arm in an arc to include the bar and garcon, the plump tourists, the colorful plastic-chaired lounge, the bungalows, and the pool.

"This, all of this shit is decadence," he told him.

"Ah, all of this, this is decadence, yes, yes, I understand. This is very good word, decadence, yes?"

"Excellent word," Eric agreed. He rose to leave.

"Kalinikta (good night)," he said.

5.

The bus stopped in the square in the center of the village, and the school children got off and scattered in different directions. Three young girls, who had stared at Eric all the way across the island, kept looking over their shoulders as they moved away. He waved, and they started

giggling. He walked to the shrine in the center of the square and lowered his pack. It was a marble statue of a white goddess. She had wings on her back, wore a flowing robe, and stood with her hands lifted from her sides, the palms outward in an attitude of supplication. One side of her face was perfect, the corner of the mouth lifted in a smile, the cheek smooth as a young girl's. But on the right side of her face a piece of marble was missing where the smile should be, and the eyebrow was arched, spoiling the symmetry and affecting the wild stare of a witch.

Eric gazed at the strange, inscrutable face, thinking the sculptor screwed it up ruined the perfection meant it to be Athena or Aphrodite maybe but cobbled that face she both loves and hates you begs and snarls lovely and terrible says 1962 must've lived here local boy's masterpiece just too bad he failed must find Lea now maybe on the beach need to change so goddamn hot . . .

He turned and surveyed the shoreline. A cement pier extended 30 meters out from the street that bordered the beach. Beyond the end of the pier and perpendicular to it a wall of large bleached rocks, 100 meters long, served as a breakwater for the fishing boats tied to both sides of the pier. The mountains of Turkey were visible far across the water, and to the right, closer in, a small island arched its central mountain up out of the calm, blue-green Aegean. Back from the white sand beach sat a row of cafe's

along the street. Flat bamboo sun-roofs cast striped shadow on the tables, where a few tourists lounged, drinking beer. The midday sun reflecting off the sand and white-washed buildings was blinding, an intense weight that drained away energy.

A figure rose from a table at the last cafe'. It was Lea, wearing a straw hat and a thin bikini. She strolled down the street toward Eric, seeming to struggle through the heat's inertia, but smiling as she approached. He thought of the day before on the beach, recognized her lazy gait, the lean legs and drooped shoulders, and smiled back.

"Yasu," he greeted.

"Yasu, Neptune. You are early."

He nodded. "It's beautiful here. Such a relief from the hotel. They gave me \$100 for twenty days of work."

"You could stay here a long time with that," Lea said. "There is a room next to mine in the pension, but you must pretend you don't know me." They walked back past the statue and down a narrow street lined with shops.

"But I don't know you, do I?" Lea looked away from his smile.

"It's down there, above the little cafe'," she pointed. "The man in the barber shop will show you the room. Tell him you'll pay 50 drachma a night. There is hot water, but it doesn't last long."

"Thanks. I gotta git oughta these hot clothes."

Shouldn't we have an Ouzo together soon?"

"I'll be waiting at the cafe' by the beach," she said. I'm glad you're here." He nodded and continued down the street alone.

The room was small, with three beds lining the walls. Louvered doors opened onto a narrow balcony that overlooked the street, and the roofs of the houses back away from the beach toward the Byzantine church. Eric stood under the cold shower in the bathroom, dried off, and saw the open door into Lea's room. Her large rucksack leaned in the corner. Light clothes and underthings lay about the room, and an opened letter was scattered on her bed.

All in Italian must be from her husband and a child's writing at the bottom got to hurt to be away trying to figure out why maybe she'll have some answers for me or at least safe arms safe Mimi always said so nice and safe to lie here but I fled like Lea not ready for commitments or just needing some assurance that it's right like the flower this child drew would be enough some flick of a switch of certainty but she'll likely talk about it should just talk for once no touch forget the usury no manipulation for a change or bullshit like smooth Kosmas delivered didn't finish his story that he likely read someplace anyway maybe discover the ending sometime or . . .

"Can you read it?" Lea asked from the doorway. Eric looked up from the page of child's drawing. She looked at

the page and back at him, her eyes revealing sorrow and confusion. Holding his gaze, she closed the door, turned the lock, and embraced him in a rush of breath.

6.

"I couldn't wait," she said afterward. She lay on her side, with her knees wrapped around his leg and her head in the crook of his arm.

"And I wasn't prone to argue," Eric said grinning. She paused awhile, then burst out laughing.

"I've forgotten so much English," she apologized. "I lived for nearly one year in Chicago, you know. But I was just a young girl, only fourteen. That was eleven years ago. I wanted so much to go back, before . . ."

"You got married?"

"Yes."

"And now you're sorry about it?"

"Oh, I just got so bored, so tired of it, nothing would happen. I was, what would you say, getting stale?"

"That's right."

"I wanted so much to have very strong feelings again, like when I was younger. But it has been terrible. I have hated myself since I left, and hated hating myself, because the only strong feeling that came was loneliness. But now I feel better." She kissed his ear, putting her tongue in it until it tickled. Eric squirmed, dug his fingers into

her ribs, and they wrestled on the bed, grabbing and giggling, until the bed post hit the wall and they stopped, listened, and laughed again embracing.

"And what about you?" she asked, lying down.

"Much the same, really. I lived through the winter with a girl in Denmark. I met her in the midst of wandering and drinking away my days, and it didn't take long to fall in love with her. She cut through the loneliness you talk of, and I realized that all the bumming around had been to find her, and all the drunken nights had been a way to numb myself from the pain of not finding her."

"I have never been drinking so much as here," Lea added.

"But when the newness wore off," Eric continued, "and it was time to sink my feet into the soil, I bolted. I had to find out if she would fade like all the others, to find out if I really am ready to sit still, even though after being with her, the traveling seems pointless, irresponsible."

"You still love this girl, too," Lea said, removing lint from his beard.

"Yea, I reckon there's no way to question that any more than I have."

She kissed the side of his face, collaring him with her arms. "You've made me terribly hungry," she whispered.

"Then let's go eat and drink."

"But shouldn't we do it again?" she implored, moving

her hands around.

"I ain't prone to" But she silenced his mouth with a kiss.

7.

Antonio picked an introduction on the mandolin, stretched his neck, and wailed the first turns of some old Greek song. His blue eyes diverged toward the ceiling, seeing nothing, for he was blind. But the straining turns of his voice created images of narrow mountain paths, the cry of magpies, and the lonely singing of peasant women in the olive groves. Eric raised his glass of wine in a salute, grinning over at Lea, and drank it all. She smiled back, drinking too, and pushed the plate of sliced cucumbers across to him.

Papa, scowling down at a case of beer, tried to fill a tray with an order. The tiny taverna was full of Greeks. The stench of the yellowed toilet in the corner mingled with aromas of wine, cigarette smoke, and peanuts. Papa, the tray now ready, walked with short plodding steps toward the table. His grey hair seemed to press down on his forehead, preventing the scowl from going away. He appeared to be bored and embittered by the crowd of customers. After the order was delivered in his slow-motion way, he turned to labor back toward the counter. Eric gestured for Lea to watch. Antonio crescendoed into the climax of the song, his

nose aimed at the ceiling. Suddenly Papa stopped in the middle of the floor and raised one foot a few centimeters. The corners of his mouth tugged, his eyes rolled, and his face threatened to crack. He alternated feet in a painful yet joyous dance, the Greeks cheering his sudden change in disposition. As Antonio held out the last note, Papa's scowl returned, and he struggled toward the counter again.

"That was wonderful!" Lea said amid the shouts of the patrons. "I knew he couldn't really be so sad."

"He hides his happiness pretty well, doesn't he?"

"This is so much more delightful than the cafe' down the beach where all those young Greek boys dance. They prance like roosters, you know, trying to be sexual and dark. It's so primitive." Lea screwed up her face in disgust. "They think you melt just to watch them, I hate it. What is the word in English for that? Chauvinists?"

"That's the word. And what makes you think I'm any different?" Eric was feeling the three bottles of wine, feeling the need to cool Lea's affection, to come clean with her. "We come from different directions, don't we, and will move on. And it's romantic here, we're both confused and lonely and horny. So we drink and laugh and use each other's body for awhile, both chauvinists, both looking for kicks, as we say. Don't you really think that's the way it works, Lea?"

She pouted for a second, thinking, then nodded. "Maybe

that's why I've felt so terrible since I left," she agreed. "Everything just goes by, and you're left alone again, empty."

"And nothing seems to last."

Antonio began another song, gaining the attention of everyone again. It was 'Zorba', and all the Greeks joined in the rousing chorus. Lea laughed and started keeping time by tilting her head. "Let's get drunk before we go to bed!" she shouted.

"Bravo!" he called back, holding his bottle high.

"More wine!"

8.

They sat together on the hillside behind the village. A light mist was falling. Behind them, the setting sun illuminated the underside of the grey-black cloud that covered the island. The filtered light caused the mountain to the north to glow pale green. The fields below them were deep, avocado green, and the sea beyond was black, the mountains of Turkey hidden in storm clouds. As the rain increased, a brilliant rainbow arched over the village. Each hue was reflected around them on the island: the burning red sun, the belly of the cloud mixing grey and orange, the under-sea greens and yellows of the fields, and the soft pink of the village houses.

"What an incredible spectacle," Eric exclaimed. A

kingfisher glided over them, its wings irridescent blue, and landed in the pink splash of an oleander. Eric gasped again at the range of color.

"Look, another rainbow outside the first one!" Lea pointed. "I don't believe this, isn't it beautiful!" They sat touching shoulders, turning to look in every direction at once.

"Makes you want to stay longer, doesn't it," Eric said.

"Yes, but it's time. Oh, it's so beautiful I want to cry!"

Eric gazed up at the two rainbows fading and then intensifying in the changing light. A third, the third order of the spectrum, he remembered, tried to arch over the other two. Lea leaned against him, taking his hand. "I have so much enjoyed spending the time here with you," he told her. "But I reckon it's time for me to go back, too." He felt her pull on his tee-shirt to wipe her eyes. "I'm hungry," he said, hugging her. "Are you?"

"Yes, but shouldn't we eat first, and drink a little wine?" Her still moist eyes now flashed at him, and as she forced a grin he kissed the crowfoot at the corner of her left eye.

"And some brandy," he said, "lots of sweet brandy."

9.

Before sunrise came the crowing of the roosters. Then as the light reached across the sea, warming Eric's back, the donkeys from the fringes of the village began their plaintive braying. They opened with long, mournful wails that shortened and diminished into wheezing, airy laughter. The fishing boats putt-putted to the pier where he sat, and the men sorted the night's catches, keeping the best for themselves. A young boy, having secured his father's boat, carried a small octopus toward the rocks, peeling the sucking wet tentacles from his wrist as he walked. He reached a flat rock, took the octopus by one leg, and flung it down with a splat. As the whip-motion was repeated, the octopus died, but he kept slapping it down to get all the tension out of its muscles.

Old Theos opened the door of his cafe', and Eric walked off the pier, greeting all the fishermen, and sat down under the bamboo awning. "Yasu, Theodoros, kalimera (good morning)," he said.

"Kalimera, kopros (lazy one)," Theos replied. "Why you up so early?"

"It is too hot, I am going north."

"Ohi, ohi, (no, no), never too hot for old man! You go with this woman?"

"Ohi."

"Ah, you are smart boy, Erico Kopros. Woman keeps you

in thee bed all thee day, yes?"

"You would like to take care of her when I go, right Theos?"

"Of course, Erico, but Theos too old now. Leave thee young womans to Erico. Will you leave her here for the Greek boys?"

"Ohi. She is going back to Italy today."

"Ah, poor Erico. You have ouzo with your coffee today, yes?"

"O.K."

"I geev it to you because you leave. Where you go?"

"I will go to Denmark, to stay a long time."

"O.K. Here is ouzo, here is coffee. To this place, Denmark, Erico. Kaimakki!"

"Kaimakki!"

"Ee Vive'!"

"Ee Vive'!"

"Salud!"

"Salud, Theos!"

"What you say in Amereeka?"

"Here's mud 'n yer eye!"

Theos shook his head. "Cheers, Erico Kopros! You shall have a good traveling."

"Efharisto poli' (thanks very much)," Eric nodded.

Lea appeared around the corner, put her rucksack in a taxi, and motioned to Eric. "My plane goes in half an

hour," she said. "I can't have breakfast with you."

"O.K." he replied. He took her in his arms, then held her shoulders and looked through the sunglasses at her eyes. "Have a good life," he said.

"Oh, don't say it that way." She kissed his nose, and drew back.

"O.K., be a good mother?"

"That's better. Be a good Viking."

"I will. Good-bye, Lea."

"Good-bye." She turned once and waved as the taxi sped out of town.

"Your coffee gets cold," Theos said as Eric sat down.

"Who made that statue of the woman over there," he asked.

"Ah, that was my oldest son, Kosta," Theos said proudly.

"He is very famous in Athens now."

"But didn't he make a mistake on her face? One side is beautiful, but the other is chipped, ugly."

Theos tossed his head back in exasperation. "No, Erico, thees is perfect, thees way. You are just too young, but you will know thees some day. Every woman is thees way. But still she is perfect. She is more whole and beautiful with thee ugly."

"Yea, I guess I see what you mean."

"You have half hour before bus. Here, we have more

ouzo. Now listen to old Theos. I will tell eet all to you about womans. Kaimakki!"

"Kaimakki, Theos. I am listening."